

# **Master's Level Teacher Preparation for Educating Immigrant Students with Special Needs in US Schools**

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## **Abstract**

This article provides results from a research project investigating how Master's level teacher training programs address the education of immigrant students at-risk and those with special needs. We surveyed Master's programs in nine states with significant populations of immigrant students. Results suggest that graduate level programs in special education emphasize selected immigrant special education training and competency areas to a limited-moderate degree. Our findings reveal that teacher training was similar among schools that differed in size and type of degree granting institution (Master's vs. Master's and Doctoral). Within-school analyses found the training area of Assessment was emphasized the most while training in Collaboration was the least emphasized. We share results from this study and also provide suggestions for future research.

## **Master's Level Teacher Preparation for Educating Immigrant Students with Special Needs in US Schools**

Many educational classrooms nationwide have significant percentages of immigrant students, including both urban and rural school systems. The continuous and sometimes dramatic increases in the number of immigrant students place tremendous pressures on educators as they attempt to effectively work with this growing population (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Although there are variations in the definition that describes who qualifies as an immigrant student, the most accepted include the following: 1) Born outside of the United States; 2) Enrolled in US schools for less than three years; and, 3) Between the ages of 3 and 19 (Emergency Immigrant Education Program, OELA).

An Urban Institute study based on Current Population Surveys data (CPS), estimated in 2000 that there were over 10.5 million school-age children of immigrants enrolled in grades K-12, representing 20% of the total K-12 student population (Fix & Passel, 2003). Of these students, Fix and Passel (2003) approximated that 2.7 million, or 5% of the total student population, are foreign born. This presents unique challenges to educators and school systems as they attempt to meet educational needs of many immigrant students in their early stages (i.e., within the first three years of formal schooling) of acculturating to United States' schools and environments. For example, Garcia and Cuéllar (2006) building on the work of Lucas (1997) wrote that:

"Most U.S. students undergo a set of important and critical transitions: from home to school and from childhood to adolescence. Immigrant children move through these same critical transitions and those associated with transitioning to a new culture and language" (p. 2240).

Therefore, in addition to dealing with transitions experienced by all children, immigrant students must adjust to new cultural experiences and may also confront stress due to a modified family structure, migration and refugee experiences, poverty, cultural isolation, limited English Proficiency, differences in the institution of schooling, minority status, or inconsistent academic preparation (Coehlo, 1994). As a result, the educational needs of these students are significant, and if not addressed appropriately, place many immigrant learners at risk.

## Literature Review

Our conceptual framework relies on three bodies of literature: 1) immigrant participation in special education; 2) the educational experiences of immigrants and the factors that represent at-risk situations; and, 3) Teacher education for work with immigrant students at-risk or those with disabilities. Although research in these areas is limited (a rationale in itself for conducting our study), the prior research provides a foundation for additional research into the education of immigrant students at-risk or those with special needs.

## Immigrant Participation in Special Education

There is a significant dearth of research that investigates immigrant participation in special education. While there are several potential reasons to explain this, the issue of sampling clearly contributes. Oftentimes studies examining immigrant special education consider immigrants and children of immigrants together or English Language Learners in the same group or, even broader, as part of a heterogeneous group of minorities in special education. Such studies have contributed greatly to research on special education; however, immigrant students (as defined above) at-risk or in special education are rarely studied as a population in their own right. While research directly related to this defined population is limited, studies that have been published yield important considerations and conclusions relevant to our study.

For example, one study completed by Dylan, Schwartz and Stiefel (2007), explored nativity differences in special education participation in addition to attendance and school mobility. This study begins to illuminate not only the incidence of immigrant participation in special education but also potential reasons behind their findings, especially the role of parents in their children's education. Within their review of prior research, Dylan, Schwartz and Stiefel discussed a study (Gershberg, 2002) that found immigrant students were placed in special education at higher rates; a study that suggested that parents' lack of involvement, resulting in part from institutional barriers, contributed to an overrepresentation of

immigrant students in special education. Conversely, in their study Dylan, Schwartz and Stiefel found that immigrant students at-risk, or those who may have a disability, received special education at substantially lower rates than their native-born peers. They indicated that language proficiency, poverty, nor the number of years in school fully explained this finding. Rather, they suggest that lower parent involvement in United States schools may lead to their inability to advocate for needed special services for their children. In support, research conducted by López (2001) and Shannon (1996) suggested that the efforts of immigrant parents are not often recognized by teachers and administrators because their contributions may not fall within dominant notions of parent participation. In short, these studies suggest that collaboration between parents of immigrant students, schools, teachers and administrators is essential to address both over and under-representation in special education. In regards to learners at-risk other researchers have documented additional possible contributing factors.

## **Immigrant Learners At-Risk: Contributing Factors**

Several researchers and authors have discussed social and educational conditions that potentially place immigrant students at-risk in learning (McCollum, 1999; Goodwin, 2000, Hoover et al., 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Factors such as language barriers, difficulty navigating their new environment, inability of teachers to bridge new concepts to prior cultural/linguistic experiential backgrounds, poverty, culture shock associated with adjusting to a new school environment, perceptions that immigrant students are incapable of meeting high educational standards, or biased/prejudicial attitudes are but a few of the social and educational factors that place immigrant students at-risk in learning. In addition, Goodwin (2000) wrote that ‘immigrant students are especially apt to receive weak curriculum’ (p. 2) further highlighting at-risk factors directly related to classroom instruction.

## **Teacher Preparation and Immigrants with Special Needs**

Unfortunately, for many students at-risk, the misinterpretation and misidentification of learner needs, along with uninformed parents often results in less than challenging classroom curricula, inappropriate referrals to special education, lack of needed special services, inadequate evidence-based interventions and less than adequate cultural competent instruction (Dylan, Schwartz & Stiefel, 2007; Hoover et al., 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As discussed in the research above, one significant result of these at-risk conditions is the potential misplacement of immigrant, as well as other students, into special education due, in part, to educators’ lack of knowledge and skills necessary to differentiate learning differences from learning or behavior disorders (i.e., effective teacher preparation) (Hoover, In Press).

In support, Smith-Davis (2000) found that many of today’s teachers of immigrant learners lack quality training and preparation to meet their educational needs. This inadequate preparation may result in the perpetuation of various at-risk learning situations such as: 1) the lack of adequate support systems for new immigrant students, 2) barriers to equal access and opportunities to learn, 3) inadequate training to meet unique needs of immigrant students using evidence-based interventions, 4) lack of knowledge of cultural and linguistic factors relevant to the needs of immigrant students, or 5) the pervasive misperception that a language difference is a language disorder (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Smith-Davis, 2000; Chaifetz, 1999; Haynes, 2001).

Specifically, results from a Pilot Study completed by Smith-Davis (2000) include:

- 1.) Immigrant students are over-represented in special education
- 2.) Language difference is often misunderstood to be a learning disability
- 3.) Some immigrant students with disabilities go un-referred to special education (finding also documented in Dylan, Schwartz & Stiefel, 2007)
- 4.) Inadequate special education supports exist for immigrant students with disabilities
- 5.) Teacher shortages exist nationwide in the education of immigrant students, including special education teachers

Therefore, given the increasing numbers of immigrant students, the lack of sufficiently trained teachers, and the dearth of information on immigrant participation in special education, research is needed to help clarify the current state of teacher preparation for working with immigrant students in university and college programs. Knowledge of specific characteristics of teacher preparation programs relative to training for effective work with immigrant students in today's schools will assist teacher trainers nationwide to evaluate and improve their own programs. This in turn will help to best prepare teachers to minimize the effects of at-risk behaviors and conditions in the classroom, which in turn, facilitates reduction of misplacements into special education and increases more effective culturally competent teaching for all immigrant students, including those with special needs.

## **Research Project**

Based on current educational at-risk needs along with recommendations from previous research discussed above, we are seeking to better understand contemporary higher education practices, issues, and concerns associated with the preparation of graduate level special education teachers to effectively educate the ever-increasing immigrant student population.

## **Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study is: To what extent do graduate special education teacher preparation programs address immigrants with special needs both in courses and/or field experience? Specific questions addressed in this research include:

- 1.) To what extent do graduate-level teacher preparation programs emphasize preparing special educators for work with immigrant students with special needs?
- 2.) Do specific school and graduate program types correlate with a greater emphasis placed on one or more training areas for work with immigrant students with special needs?
- 3.) Does the graduate-level special education teacher preparation for work with immigrants with special needs vary significantly across states with high populations of immigrant learners?
- 4.) To what extent is field experience with immigrant students at-risk and/or those with special needs incorporated into the graduate level training?

- 5.) In which types of courses is content for teaching immigrant students with special needs most frequently found?

## **Survey Development/Distribution**

The survey developed for this study includes items evaluating selected knowledge and skill areas necessary to effectively educate immigrant students with special needs. A survey comprised of Likert items, grouped within selected categories modeled after CEC NCATE Professional Competencies (CEC, 1998) was developed. The categories included: Foundations/Characteristics, Individual Learning Differences, Instructional Strategies/ Learning Environments, Communication, Teaching/Instructional Planning, Assessment, and Collaboration.

Specific items were generated reflecting these training areas from information found in the 2001 Harvard Education Review Special Issue: Immigration and Education as well as from Smith-Davis, (2000), Rong and Prissle (1998) and various CEC NCATE documents reflecting training competencies. The survey was initially reviewed by several experts in teacher training for clarity and accuracy of content, and for the extent to which the items reflected the general training areas (e.g., Foundations, Assessment, Collaboration etc). Based on the reviewer feedback the survey was revised to include 40 items within the seven competency training areas as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Survey Items within each Competency Training Area**

### **Foundations/Characteristics**

- Over representation of immigrant students in special education
- Acculturation needs of immigrant learners
- Diversity of views that different cultures hold towards disabilities
- Understand similarities and differences between homeland and school cultures
- Role of cultural values in the education of immigrant students
- Knowledge of the impact on immigrant students moving from one society to another
- Educational characteristics of immigrant students with special needs

### **Individual Learning Differences**

- Language difference versus learning disability
- Social barriers confronting immigrant learners
- Academic barriers confronting immigrant learners
- Language barriers confronting immigrant learners
- Experiential background barriers confronting immigrant learners
- Cultural awareness and diversity in the classroom
- Determining differences between expected behaviors due to cultural/linguistic needs versus behavior disorders due to a disability

### **Instructional Strategies/Learning Environments**

- Meeting instructional needs of immigrant students appropriately placed in special education
- Culturally relevant classroom instruction
- Teaching methods specific to meeting unique needs of immigrant learners

- ESL instruction
- Native language instructional methods

## Communication

- Cross-cultural communication skills
- Models for assisting immigrant students to successfully acquire English language skills
- Use of instructional conversational strategies

## Teaching/Instructional Planning

- Meeting second language needs of immigrant students
- Language and literacy instruction across the curriculum
- Contextualized teaching and learning
- Cultural competence in teaching
- Use of cooperative learning communities in the classroom
- Addressing post-traumatic stress in immigrant students

## Assessment

- Prereferral issues specific to at-risk immigrant students
- Cross cultural assessment
- Classroom-based informal assessments
- Curriculum-based assessment
- Use of translators/interpreters in the special education referral/assessment process
- Language Assessment
- Diagnostic academic assessment for immigrant learners
- Diagnostic social/emotional/behavioral assessment for immigrant learners

## Collaboration

- Community resource support for immigrant families
- Collaboration with other educators in teaching immigrant students
- Working with parents of immigrant learners
- Advocate for needs of immigrant learners

Respondents indicated the level of preparation their special education Masters Program places on each item as it pertains to preparing special educators for work with immigrant students with special needs (1 = None; 2 = Limited; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Extensive). Also, respondents indicated whether Field Experience was included in the training for each item. Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) was determined for the survey and was found to be .968.

In order to ensure anonymity of the schools in our database, we numbered the surveys by institution. In addition to the 40 survey items, the instrument gathered various demographic information including: Size and location of institution; CEC NCATE accredited (y/n); type of degrees offered (MA only or MA and Doctoral); number of faculty in the school of education/special education departments; number of MA graduates in special education annually; and percent of immigrant special education students in the school districts where graduates teach. The survey also requested the titles or types of courses in

which the surveyed knowledge/skills were most taught. The survey was sent to chairpersons in the department of special education at the selected graduate training programs and included two follow-up mailings.

## Sample

### Graduate Training Program Selection

In effort to gather information about the potential training of Master's level students in special education programs for work with immigrant students with special needs, we first determined the states with a significant percentage of Pre K-12 English language learners (ELL) and immigrants by examining the list of states from Kindler's 2002 National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition report as well as Baca & Cervantes (2004). Based on these sources, we selected nine states with significant ELL and immigrant populations: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, New York, New Mexico and Texas. We then used the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE) database cross-referenced with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs National Center for Special Education Personnel & Related Service Providers database to locate all of the Institutes of Higher Education granting masters level degrees in Special Education in each of the nine listed states. The search yielded contact information for 193 schools with masters level special education programs in the selected nine states. These programs received the survey for participation in this research.

## Results

Research yielded a 40% response rate in which seventy-nine institutions returned the survey. Four of the 79 respondents reported that they no longer had graduate special education programs; therefore a total of 75 graduate level programs out of a possible 188 are included in these analyses. Using selected demographics, survey responses were tabulated and analyzed in a variety of ways to best understand the current training of graduate level teachers for work with immigrant students with special needs. The following Tables summarize data collected reflective of our five primary research questions.

**Research Question 1:** To what extent do graduate-level teacher preparation programs emphasize preparing special educators for work with immigrant students with special needs?

Table 2 provides the total survey means reflecting the reported emphasis by graduate level preparation programs:

**Table 2: Mean Scores of Competencies by CEC/NCATE Accreditation**

Competency Subscale	NCATE & CEC Accredited	Non NCATE/CEC Accredited
<b>Foundations/Characteristics</b>	2.58	2.74
<b>Individual Learning Differences</b>	2.80	2.89
<b>Instructional Strategies/ Learning Environments</b>	2.73	2.82
<b>Communication</b>	2.49	2.63
<b>Teaching/Instructional Planning</b>	2.86	2.94
<b>Assessment</b>	2.96	2.99
<b>Collaboration</b>	2.43	2.64
<b>Total Survey</b>	<b>2.71</b>	<b>2.86</b>

*Scale: 1-4: 1 = None; 2 = Limited; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Extensive*

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As shown, the range of emphasis is from a low of 2.53 (Collaboration) to a high of 2.97 (Assessment). All means fell within the Limited to low-Moderate area of emphasis.

Tables 3, 4 and 5 provide a summary of the training area means broken down by whether or not the program operates with CEC/NCATE accreditation, by level of degree offered (MA Only; MA/Doctoral), and by size.

**Table 3: Mean Scores of Competencies by CEC/NCATE Accreditation**

Competency Subscale	Total Mean
<b>Foundations/Characteristics</b>	2.66
<b>Individual Learning Differences</b>	2.85
<b>Instructional Strategies/ Learning Environments</b>	2.78
<b>Communication</b>	2.56
<b>Teaching/Instructional Planning</b>	2.90
<b>Assessment</b>	2.97
<b>Collaboration</b>	2.53
<b>Total Survey</b>	<b>2.78</b>

*Scale: 1-4: 1 = None; 2 = Limited; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Extensive*

*Scale: 1-4: 1 = None; 2 = Limited; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Extensive*

As shown, the overall average is 2.71 and 2.86 for NCATE accredited and those not NCATE accredited, respectively. The highest mean score for CEC/NCATE accredited schools was in Assessment (2.96) and the lowest mean score was in Collaboration (2.43). The highest mean scores for non-CEC/NCATE accredited schools were in Teaching/Instructional Planning and Assessment (2.94) and the lowest mean score was in Communication (2.63).

**Table 4: Mean Scores of Competencies by Type of Degree Granting Program**

Competency Subscale	MA + Doctoral	MA Only
<b>Foundations/Characteristics</b>	2.70	2.65
<b>Individual Learning Differences</b>	2.86	2.85
<b>Instructional Strategies/ Learning Environments</b>	2.65	2.80
<b>Communication</b>	2.28	2.62
<b>Teaching/Instructional Planning</b>	2.81	2.91
<b>Assessment</b>	2.99	2.97
<b>Collaboration</b>	2.56	2.53
<b>Total Survey</b>	<b>2.74</b>	<b>2.79</b>

*Scale: 1-4: 1 = None; 2 = Limited; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Extensive*

Table 4 shows that the overall average is 2.74 and 2.79 for MA/Doctoral and MA Only degree programs, respectively. The highest mean score for both types of programs was in Assessment (2.99; 2.97) while the lowest rated was Collaboration for each type of program (2.56; 2.53).

Table 5 illustrates mean scores by institution size.

**Table 5: Mean Scores of Competencies by Size of Institution**

Competency Subscale	1-Mean	2-Mean	3-Mean	4-Mean
<b>Foundations/Characteristics</b>	2.56	2.78	2.63	2.68
<b>Individual Learning Differences</b>	2.73	2.83	3.01	2.81
<b>Instructional Strategies/ Learning Environments</b>	2.80	2.74	2.79	2.76
<b>Communication</b>	2.48	2.62	2.55	2.62
<b>Teaching/Instructional Planning</b>	2.82	2.95	3.02	2.81
<b>Assessment</b>	2.92	3.07	2.89	3.09
<b>Collaboration</b>	2.46	2.68	2.44	2.57
<b>Total Survey</b>	2.73	2.87	2.74	2.79

*1 = up to 4999; 2 = 5000-9999; 3 = 10,000-19,999; 4 = 20,000 above*

*Scale: 1-4: 1 = None; 2 = Limited; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Extensive*

As shown, the overall emphasis based on size was consistent, ranging from Limited to Moderate emphasis for each training area. Assessment received the greatest emphasis in three of the four size breakdowns, while Collaboration received the lowest rating in three of four school sizes.

In addition, comparisons were made both across school types as well as within school types using ANOVA and correlational statistical procedures. Results comparing emphasis on training areas between CEC/NCATE and non-NCATE accredited schools showed no significant difference in reported emphasis. Similar results were found when comparisons were made between MA Only and MA/Doctoral programs.

To further understand within program or school type, ANOVA was conducted to determine if one or more training areas are emphasized relative to accreditation and level of degree offered. Results showed no significant variation in emphasis on training areas within non-NCATE schools or within MA/Doctoral degree granting programs. However, differences were observed within CEC/NCATE accredited programs and MA Only programs as illustrated in Tables 6 and 7.

**Table 6: ANOVA of school means within 7 categories for NCATE/CEC schools**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8.756	6	1.459	3.889	.001
Within Groups	94.199	251	.375		
Total	102.955	257			

**Table 7: ANOVA of school means within 7 categories for MA Only schools**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	10.165	6	1.694	4.316	.000
Within Groups	163.298	416	.393		
Total	173.463	422			

As shown, a significant difference between reported emphasis on one or more training areas was found. The Tukey Multiple Comparison Test was employed to determine those training areas with significantly more emphasis within each type of school/program. Tables 8 and 9 illustrate these findings.

**Table 8: Multiple Comparison Test Results comparing Seven Training Areas within CEC/NCATE Accredited Programs**

Compared Training Areas	Mean Difference	Significance
Teaching/Instructional Planning with Collaboration.....	.43 .....	.046
Assessment with Foundations/Characteristics.....	.48 .....	.017
Assessment with Collaboration.....	.54 .....	.004

The training area of Assessment is emphasized to significantly greater extent in CEC/NCATE accredited schools over two of the other training areas, including Collaboration.

**Table 9: Multiple Comparison Test Results Comparing Seven Training Areas within MA Only Programs**

Compared Training Areas	Mean Difference	Significance
Teaching/Instructional Planning with Collaboration .....	.39 .....	.013
Assessment with Foundations .....	.36 .....	.027
Assessment with Individual Learning		

Differences.....	.34	.043
Assessment with Collaboration/ Professional.....	.46	.001

As shown, the training area of assessment is emphasized to greater extent in MA Only programs over three of the other training areas, including collaboration.

**Research Question 2:** Do specific school and graduate program types correlate with a greater emphasis placed one or more training areas for work with immigrant students with special needs?

Correlations were conducted relative to emphasis on training areas and various demographics. Results showed no significant relationship between various program characteristics (i.e., size, state, etc) and emphasis on one or more of the training areas. This finding is consistent with the other findings in this study.

**Research Question 3:** Does the graduate-level special education teacher preparation for work with immigrants with special needs vary significantly by state? Data were also tabulated relative to each state selected for this project. Table 10 provides the range of emphasis in the training areas by state.

**Table 10: Training Areas Receiving the Lowest/Highest Emphasis in each State**

State	Lowest / Highest Emphasis Areas (Means)
AZ	Collaboration (2.00) / Instructional Learning Differences (2.71)
CA	Collaboration (2.68) / Assessment (3.19)
CO	Collaboration (2.80) / Assessment (3.10)
FL	Collaboration (2.67) / Communication (2.94)
IL	Communication (2.29) / Assessment (2.90)
NM	Communication (2.60) / Instructional Learning Differences (3.11)
NV	Communication (1.33) / Teaching/Instructional Planning (3.17)
NY	Collaboration (2.21) / Teaching /Instructional Planning (2.82)
TX	Collaboration (2.58) / Individual Learning Differences (3.06)

(Scale: 1-4 = None; 2 = Limited; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Extensive)

As shown, the training area of Collaboration received the lowest emphasis in most states while Assessment, Instructional Learning Differences, and Teaching/Instructional Planning received the greatest emphasis.

**Research Question 4:** To what extent is field experience with immigrant students at-risk and/or those with special needs incorporated into the graduate level training?

Programs were asked to indicate if fieldwork was a component in their training of educators in each of the seven training areas. Table 11 provides the percent of schools that indicated that fieldwork was incorporated into preparation in the training area.

**Table 11: Extent to which fieldwork is completed as a component in each training area.**

**Training Area                  Percent of Schools Requiring Field Work**

Training Area	Percent of Schools Requiring Field Work
Foundations/Characteristics	10%
Individual Learning Differences	14%
Instructional Strategies/ Learning Environments	26%
Communication	15%
Teaching/Instructional Planning	23%
Assessment	22%
Collaboration	13%

As shown, fieldwork is incorporated into training for work with immigrant special education students in all training areas. Fieldwork is most used to assist with the development of Instructional Strategies/Learning Environments and least in the area of Collaboration.

Research Question 5: In which types of courses is content for learning about teaching immigrant special education students most frequently found? The most frequent types of courses identified by the schools for teaching about immigrant special education issues and skills are:

- 1.) Introduction or Foundations of special education
- 2.) Methods
- 3.) Assessment
- 4.) Parent/family/community related course
- 5.) Ed psych/child development

The courses are listed in order of frequency as indicated by all responding graduate programs. Also, as shown, issues pertaining to immigrant special education are included in a variety of classes including both theory and practical application courses. The Introduction or Foundations classes are the courses that contain coverage of immigrant special education topics in most programs followed by Methods and Assessment classes.

## **Discussion**

Results from our study suggest that graduate level special education teacher preparation programs place a consistent amount of emphasis on similar important training competencies for work with immigrant students with special needs. Overall, graduate level teachers appear to receive similar emphasis in their immigrant special education training regardless of school size, state in which they attend school, accreditation status or type of degree offered (i.e., MA Only; MA and Doctoral Degree). In addition, preparation for immigrant special education appears to reflect consistent emphasis within training areas. That is, the competency area of Assessment was rated higher in most programs regardless of

demographic or NCATE accreditation status. Similarly, the training area of Collaboration was consistently ranked as receiving the least amount of emphasis in most of the surveyed graduate level training programs.

While the programs reported similar results for the different competency areas, they also reported only limited to moderate emphasis in most areas. Assessment was more significantly emphasized over two or more of the other six that fell within the high moderate to extensive training emphasis. With a few exceptions, this may reflect a balanced effort in teacher preparation or a belief that most of these competencies are of similar importance to teachers of immigrant students with special needs. When we considered the extent to which similar types of programs placed emphasis on the training areas within their own programs, we found that the area of assessment is considered a most important competency area in most programs. This highlights the perceived significance and importance of assessment when used with immigrant students who may have special needs. Conversely, within-school comparisons showed that the area of Collaboration was emphasized significantly less than two or more of the other training areas. This finding requires further investigation since skills associated with collaboration are critical to effectively educate immigrant students, particularly as more and more districts employ response to intervention practices within multi-tiered instructional frameworks. Furthermore, our findings provide evidence that supports Dylan, Schwartz, and Steifel (2007) in that potential barriers to parent involvement in schooling may prevent parents from advocating for their children's needs regarding special education. If collaboration is not an area that is adequately emphasized in teacher training programs, the consequences may ultimately be inappropriate education (either in or out of special education) due to lack of collaborative efforts with parents of immigrants students.

A useful strategy in the analysis of survey results relates to identification of 'hard' and 'easy' items. Hard items are those consistently rated lower while easy items are those receiving consistently high ratings from respondents. Our analysis of the top ten hard and easy items yielded interesting results as shown below:

## **Item Difficulty**

**Hard items** (on average schools scored themselves lowest on the below items):

20. Addressing post-traumatic stress
40. Native language instructional methods
33. Impact of moving from one society to another
13. Community resource support for immigrant families
32. Use of translators/interpreters in special education
25. Similarities/differences between homeland and school cultures
36. Models to successfully acquire English language skills
21. Use of instructional conversational strategies
38. Advocate for needs of immigrant learners
19. Teaching methods to meet unique needs of immigrant learners

**Easy Items** (on average schools scored themselves highest on the below items):

27. Classroom-based informal assessments
22. Curriculum-based assessment
4. Meeting Instructional needs

24. Diagnostic academic assessment
28. Use of cooperative learning communities in the classroom
31. Cultural awareness and diversity in the classroom
6. Language and literacy instruction across the curriculum
3. Language difference versus learning disability
9. Culturally relevant classroom instruction
29. Diagnostic social/emotional/behavioral assessment

The ten hard and easy items identified are listed in order of average response by all respondents (i.e., Item 20 was rated the lowest on average by respondents, while Item 27 was collectively rated the highest). Careful review of these items clearly shows that many of the highest or easy rated items are those associated with assessment and classroom instructional practices typically appropriate for most learners with special needs (e.g., Curriculum-based assessment, cooperative learning). Those rated the lowest (hard) are more specific to individual needs often directly associated with immigrant students (e.g., post-traumatic stress, Native language instruction, community resource support for immigrant families). This suggests that graduate level teacher preparation provides general training to meet immigrant special education needs but does not provide necessary specific training to meet unique needs of these students.

Also, a surprising finding was the low ranking of two items frequently suggested by bilingual special educators as necessary for teaching English language learners, which includes many immigrant students. These include models of native language instruction and models of English language development. Both of these items appeared on the “hard item list” and ranked number 2 for native language instruction and 7 for English language development. Two possible explanations that may account for these low ratings include: 1) this study was framed as an immigrant special education study and not an English Language Learner in Special Education study; and, 2) the fact that even though the survey was sent to the nine states with the highest number of immigrant and ELL students and the highest number of bilingual special education training programs, only a few bilingual special education training programs exist in these states as well as across the country. This may account, in part, for the lower ratings on the emphasis on native language instruction.

In regards to types of courses in which immigrant special education issues and practices are most frequently discussed these varied by programs but consistently appeared to be in introduction, methods and assessment classes. Also, fieldwork is considered an integral component in the training of graduate level teachers to meet immigrant special education needs. In addition, the training areas with the most fieldwork correspond with the degree of emphasis. Each of the competency areas of Instructional Strategies, Assessment and Instructional Planning were reported to have associated field experiences in almost one-quarter of the responding graduate level programs. These were also the three training areas that were rated as having the most emphasis in the programs. Conversely, the competency area of Collaboration in meeting immigrant special education needs received the lowest rated emphasis in most programs and also had the lowest amount of associated field experience.

Although more research is needed beyond the self-reported data we collected in this study, we are able to draw several important conclusions:

- 1.) Graduate level programs in states with high populations of immigrant students provide limited to moderated training to meet specific immigrant special education needs with no states, on average, providing extensive graduate preparation.

2.) Competency training areas that received the greatest emphasis also have the largest amount of field experiences, while those receiving the lower emphasis had lower amounts of associated field experiences.

3.) Issues highly specific to the needs of immigrant learners (e.g., post-traumatic stress; acculturation) are the least emphasized aspects of graduate level preparation while aspects typically associated with education of all learners with special needs (e.g., curriculum-based measurement) received greater emphasis.

Overall, results allow us to conclude that training programs are providing preparation in various important competency areas; competencies that are appropriate for effectively educating immigrant as well as other learners with special needs.

## **Limitations/Generalizations**

This research is limited in two important ways. First, the response rate from the graduate schools is 40%, which is minimally acceptable, and results must be generalized with this in mind. Second, the study is limited to the current knowledge and expertise of those completing the survey. Efforts to identify possible explanations for the lower return rate indicated that some of those not returning the survey did know how and in what ways immigrant special education issues were addressed in their programs; thus, being unable to adequately complete the survey. This is an important finding, in and of itself, since the growth of immigrant special education populations in our classroom settings will clearly impact teacher preparation programs. Therefore, results from this study may assist other programs to further clarify the extent to which their programs emphasize specific training competency areas to meet teacher preparation needs for work with immigrant at-risk or those with special needs. This, in turn, also becomes important should follow-up work with these programs be completed.

## **Implications for Special Education Teacher Preparation**

Based on the results and conclusions from this study several research issues emerge and require additional study:

- 1.) How might needs unique to immigrant students be best incorporated into graduate level teacher preparation?
- 2.) Collaboration is an essential skill in working with immigrant students with special needs. In effort to assist parents in advocating for their children's educational needs, collaboration must be addressed in more in-depth ways in teacher preparation. How might training programs improve their education by providing additional emphasis on collaborative skills?
- 3.) What are current school district assessment and instructional policies concerning the education of immigrant learners at-risk or those with special needs, and how do these compare with training that educators receive in our special education preparation programs?
- 4.) How are instructional practices emphasized in our graduate level preparation programs applied or used with immigrant students with special needs in fieldwork assignments (e.g., curriculum-based measurement, cooperative learning)? And, in what ways are these effective with these learners?

Additional research and study, including a follow up study to this project, will help to further clarify the linkage between school district policy, classroom instruction, and teacher preparation for work with immigrant learners with special needs. Results from this study provide an initial understanding of special education graduate level preparation, from which other programs may build or expand upon, as they further advance their efforts to meet the unique needs of immigrant students at-risk or those with special needs in our school systems nationwide.

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